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ABSTRACT

It is possible to tie teacher compensation to professional growth, without reference to standardized test scores. Tying pay to students' achievement scores does not account for the different levels of students, and teacher testing does not separate good teachers from bad. In Rutland Northeast, Vermont, each school has its own locally elected school board with complete budget and personnel authority. The cultural climate of Vermont discourages the confrontational and formalized processes often seen in other settings. However, putting the details into contract language acceptable to all took 4 years and required leadership maturity, tenacity, and continuity. The salary matrix remained in a traditional format with salary steps granted for years of service and graduate credits or degrees. What has changed is the new option of presenting an annual plan for professional growth and a portfolio, with evaluations and observations, for approval to move from column to column in the salary schedule. Indications of professional growth can include enrichment, workshops, national certification, and curriculum improvement. Using this method is a choice, but one cannot afterward change back to the old system. In the first year of implementation, about 6 percent of teachers submitted portfolios to qualify under the new system. In successful programs, salary advancement is not limited to the few, professional development is broadly defined, and curricular and instructional leadership is rewarded. Also, sufficient development and implementation is needed, perhaps 4 or 5 years. The maturity and capability of teachers, principals, and boards is essential. A plan should fit the context, history, and traditions of the schools. (AUTHOR/RKJ)

Linking School Goals and Learning Standards to Teacher Evaluation and Compensation

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I. Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in teacher merit pay plans and proposals across the nation. The shortcomings of the traditional salary matrix are obvious. Everyone knows of an exceptional teacher's caring for students, fine teaching and contributions to the school. They also know these good works often go unrecognized and unrewarded. Citizens anecdotally point to another teacher who apparently manifests little commitment and note that both are paid on the same basis. Seeing some truth in these concerns, the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union teachers, administrators and board members addressed this issue.

Neither school boards nor teachers opposed paying people for extra contributions or above average performance, they just needed to have a way to do it fairly and honestly. A critical first step was that teachers and board members studied alternative pay schemes around the nation before moving forward. They found that tying pay to achievement test scores does not account for the different levels of students, and teacher testing doesn't separate good teachers from bad. Rutland Northeast wanted to avoid the harmful effects of these types of failed plans.

As teachers and board members set down to work, they had three critical advantages. First, despite hard times in earlier negotiations, both board and teacher leadership had matured. All looked to the good of children and sought to avoid negotiations conflict. Second, Vermont supervisory union structures have lent themselves to true site-based governance. In Rutland Northeast, each school has its own locally elected school board with complete budget and personnel authority. This means that decision making is nearby, personal and responsive. Third, small districts, population sparseness and the cultural climate

of Vermont discourages the confrontational and formalized processes often seen in other settings.

II. Building a Standards Based Evaluation and Compensation System

Tying teacher pay to school goals was first raised in labor negotiations. Yet, developing such a complex and new system was not feasible during labor talks. Although bargaining was collaborative, the negotiators were under timeline pressures and a multitude of traditional contract articles had to be resolved. A more freewheeling and brainstorming environment was needed. Likewise, critical points sometimes required extensive and exhaustive work over many sessions.

It took four years from initial discussions to formal agreement. While this may seem a long time, it was this "make haste slowly" mentality that resulted in a 6:1 ratification vote by the teachers.

Year One: Initial Concepts - As part of the negotiated agreement, the *Teacher Compensation Committee* was formed and a philosophical framework was established. The plan had to be fair, equitable, financially competitive, and financially stable over time. It also had to encourage professional growth, pedagogical improvements, intellectual achievements, and contributions to school goals.

Year Two: Early Explorations - After essential principles were defined, the study committee hit a block. Philosophical differences, the press of other demands, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient knowledge and understanding all stood in the way. In short, the commitment was not yet ripe. At the end of year two, the negotiation teams revisited the topic, recognized the failed efforts and renewed their commitment.

Year Three: Plan Development and Presentation - The renewed group (with many new members) established a calendar of meetings and tasks, reviewed the literature, studied reasons for successes and failures, and considered the local culture. This group developed and presented its report to the school boards and teacher associations at the end of year three. Both groups positively received and endorsed the Report of the Teacher Compensation Committee (1999).

Year Four: Hammering Out Contract Language - The report was now turned over to the negotiations committees to translate into contract language. As is often the case, unanticipated trouble spots were found. In particular, changes to the teacher evaluation model were greater than expected and the teachers were rightfully concerned with the effect on their membership. The teachers were authorized to proceed but if they were seen as going too far, they could incite a backlash and cause rejection of the plan. Over several months, with sweeping revisions offered by both sides, the plan was translated into acceptable contract language.

For teachers and school boards to sit down together to talk about these issues was an achievement within itself; to reach agreement was exceptional. There were a number of key process factors:

- Leadership maturity - Both the teacher and board teams were leaders. They constantly held to the higher purpose of educating children. Both teachers and board groups weeded out uncompromising team members.
- Tenacity - Team leaders simply would not let the momentum ooze away. Meetings were held, homework was completed, and steady progress was pushed at every step.
- Continuity - Overlap in the study teams and negotiations teams allowed the process to flow smoothly from one step to the next.

- Joint Presentations - The recommendations were presented by school board members and teachers working together. For both teams, the participants were respected members of their groups.

III. Linking Teacher Compensation to School and District Goals:

Teachers' Professional Portfolios

At the heart of the system are the "salary column moveover" criteria. The salary matrix remained in a traditional format with salary steps granted for years of service and number of graduate credits/ degrees. What has changed is how teachers move from column to column. As contrasted with adding up the necessary number of graduate credits; teachers now present their professional portfolio to the move-over committee for approval. The organization of this portfolio mirrors the state's relicensing criteria and includes:

- Annual professional growth plans - Within the portfolio, teachers must submit their annual growth plans for the preceding years. Annual plans must be approved by the supervisor at the beginning of the year and address what the teacher will do to advance school and district learning goals. An end of year evaluation of actual accomplishments is also a required part of the plan.

- Evaluations - Annual summative evaluations and classroom observations are included in the portfolio. Performance evaluation goes beyond classroom observations.

- Evidence of state standards - Minimum clock hour requirements are specified in the areas of learning, professional knowledge, collegueship, advocacy, and accountability. Teachers may concentrate in one or more of these areas depending upon their specialty, skills, special talents and desires.

• Expanding and encouraging professional growth - Requirements may be met by a combination of courses, workshops, district curriculum work, collaboration, enrichment, national certification, serving as mentors or peer coaches, public engagement, enhancing social and personal health of students, and a host of like areas provided they advance school and district goals.

The Role of Test Scores - Vermont requires each school to establish growth targets in achievement test scores. In Rutland Northeast, teachers are not held responsible for specific standardized test score gains; however, their contributions to improving student learning are important. Working with colleagues on updating curriculum, realigning their own curriculum, improving instruction and contributing to the growth of the school are all relevant. Boards and teachers concluded that direct links of achievement test scores to teacher pay have proven the Achilles heel of alternate compensation schemes. Thus, they avoided them.

Transition provisions - All new teachers enter the new system. Senior teachers may choose to enter the new system or continue under the old system. However, once they change, they cannot return to the old system. The new system offers a broader range of professional development and salary advancement opportunities that are attractive to senior teachers.

IV. The Move-Over Review Panel

Moving from column to column is based on both qualitative and quantitative criteria. Neither the teachers nor the board wished to move from a strictly quantitative (graduate credits) system to a completely qualitative or subjective system. Consequently, as noted above, minimum hours of work are

required in each area. Nevertheless, the move-over review panel must still make a qualitative determination as to whether the activities advanced school and district goals.

A pool of panel members, who serve staggered terms, exists at any given time. For each teacher's portfolio review, a school board member and a teachers' association representative are drawn by lottery. The teacher's principal also sits on the panel.

Like any group that makes qualitative judgements, they must calibrate their judgements through joint training. One group cannot be seen as overly lax and another as overly rigorous. Consequently, extensive training sessions were held with all judges and alternates during fall, 2000. After the teacher portfolios were received and reviewed by the judges, additional training and calibration sessions were held. The judges had real issues to resolve rather than theoretical ones.

An appeals panel is provided if a teacher disagrees with the judgement of the move-over panel. All teachers and board members who serve in the pool, along with the superintendent's designee, are empowered to meet and resolve any outstanding issues that may arise in the implementation of the process.

V. Supervision and Evaluation Models

All too frequently, elegantly designed teacher evaluation systems are adopted that outrun the school's capabilities to implement and maintain such labor-intensive enterprises. Evaluation specialists develop long lists of essential teacher characteristics with rubrics for observing, assessing, classifying and reporting on these characteristics. At the same time, rigorous evaluation protections are built into union contracts, law and state regulations.

While these and other such models serve as excellent sets of procedures, they fall prey to the demands of time. Principals, with good intentions, have too many teachers to evaluate, are distracted by the issue of the hour, and are asked to rate more dimensions than they can observe. While teachers deserve feedback, the sheer volume makes these systems laborious and difficult (if not impossible) to operate. Few districts can politically or economically afford to hire sufficient administrative staff to properly run their evaluation programs.

Recognizing this problem, teachers and board members worked around it by:

- Setting the observations of proven teachers at one per year.
- Increasing the importance of the individual's goal setting and self-assessment activities. An annual growth plan with short pre- and post-conferences is a requirement for all teachers.
- Streamlining and clearly defining the extended supervision and evaluation of teachers in their first two years of service. This coincided with the new state law on probationary teachers and is also good practice.
- Encouraging mentoring and peer coaching apart from the formal evaluation process.
- Simplifying improvement recommendations while retaining more intense supervision and evaluation for low-performing teachers.
- Allowing check-lists in areas not needing improvements.

Many teacher evaluation systems focus strictly on the act of teaching. However, poor teacher performance is often for reasons other than pedagogy -- poor relationships with students and adults being the most frequent. Consequently, explicit evaluation criteria include positive learning environments,

collegial and professional relations, positive problem resolution and the like (Supervision and Evaluation Models, 2000).

Teacher evaluations are placed on the table as part of the teacher's move-over portfolio. Of course, proficient teaching performance is essential. However, it is the broadly conceived contributions of the teacher to school goals and improvement that are key to salary advancement.

VI. Conclusions: Factors Leading to Successful Program Adoption

The earlier noted team characteristics of leadership, tenacity, continuity, and joint presentations deserve emphasis. Just as important, in examining the successes and failures of others through the work of Carolyn Kelley (1995) and Allan Odden (1997), the teachers and boards adopted essential features:

- All teachers can participate - Salary advancement is not limited to a few.
- Professional development is broadly defined - A range of activities count toward salary advancement. Teachers can individually tailor their professional work. The key is a demonstrable linkage to school learning goals.
- Group activities count - In school-wide reform and with external accountability models, working together for school goals is important. Curriculum and instructional leadership is rewarded.
- Sufficient development and implementation time - The four-year process may seem long to policy makers wanting instant results. It takes this long. Further, the new contract is for five years, which allows time to workout the inevitable glitches.
- Administrative capability -- The leadership maturity of boards and teachers is noted earlier. However, both teachers and boards took into account the maturity and capabilities of the principals to fairly operate the system.

• Local culture and synergy - The plan fit the context, history, and traditions of the teachers and boards. It recognized the needs of veteran staff and the requirements of the district's curriculum work. School strategic plans and assessment systems were integrated. Improvements to the teacher portfolio system and the teacher evaluation system were folded-in. The various systems were merged.

Linking teacher pay to teacher performance is still in its infancy. In the first year of implementation, about 10% of the faculty notified that they wished to advance under the new system. When the due date arrived, 6% submitted their portfolios. An additional 4% of senior teachers opted to moveover under the grandfathered system. As most of the portfolio moveovers were veteran teachers and salary movement is higher than in previous years, it appears that there is some level of pent-up demand. Whether the second year will see more teachers encouraged to moveover is still to be seen.

In the Rutland Northeast model, the consistency of the salary move-over committees over time is unknown. Will the call for professional development and salary resources exceed projections? Administrators remain concerned about the time needed for evaluation efforts and their desire to provide rich, deep and meaningful feedback.

A standards based environment, the requirement that all children learn, and an ever changing and more complex curriculum all tell us that traditional compensation systems are no longer appropriate. Only recently have national teacher leaders joined school board leaders in calling for new models of compensating teachers. Systems based on advancing school and district goals without tying either schools or teachers to specific test score gains opens new territories and opportunities to answer this important need.

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